Doing citizenship: The cultural origin of civic agency in the public shpere

Dahlgren, Peter

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural Studies

London, Thousand Oaks CA
and New Delhi
Vol 9(3) 267–286; 1367-5494
DOI: 10.1177/1367549406066073
www.sagepublications.com

Doing citizenship

The cultural origins of civic agency in the public sphere

Peter Dahlgren
Lund University

ABSTRACT The notion of civic agency gains relevance in the discussions about declining participation in democracy. This article argues that we need to take a 'cultural turn' in our understanding of such agency, seeing citizenship not just in formal terms but also in regard to meaning, practices, communication and identities. It pulls together various strands of thought that are helpful in conceptualizing civic agency, first from the republican conception of democracy, and then from perspectives on civil society. Thereafter it focuses on public spheres and the civic competencies associated with them, particularly the communicative variety. Finally, it critically addresses the notion of deliberative democracy, a concept that has come to signal the mode of communicative interaction of the public sphere, and suggests that this view of civic communication ignores a number of important issues in regard to the cultural aspects of civic competence.

KEYWORDS *citizenship, civic agency, cultural studies, democracy theory, public sphere*

The discussions around declining civic participation in democracy have become a global discourse. Many of these discussions are framed by political science or political sociology. Such contributions take us part of the way in understanding what is going on among citizens. Yet, to formulate in positive terms notions about civic agency requires also a cultural turn, a perspective which can shed light on meaning, practices, communication and identities. Cultural studies has much to offer in this regard, if its practitioners decide to set their sights on these themes. Elsewhere I have explored what I call civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2003), where I try to sketch the cultural dimensions of civic engagement. This article will probe further the notions of civic agency and civic competence by exploring the relationships between perspectives deriving from political theory, political sociology, public sphere theory and political communication within the horizons of cultural theory, cultural studies and popular culture. More

specifically, it begins with the political theory of republican democracy, probing how we might understand the ways in which republican civic agency is predicated on cultural parameters. Thereafter, it looks briefly at the discussions from political sociology about the everyday life of civil society through the lens of cultural theory. Following this, it focuses in on public spheres and the civic competencies associated with them, particularly the communicative variety, highlighting the general cultural connections to agency in the public sphere as well as the relevance of popular culture. Finally, it critically addresses the notion of deliberative democracy, a concept which has come to signal the mode of communicative interaction of the public sphere. It is suggested that its general view of civic communication ignores a number of important issues with regard to the cultural aspects of civic competence – issues which cultural studies could address fruitfully.

The horizon of political theory: republicanism and active citizenship

There are a number of ways of classifying citizenship. One of the more familiar ones in the contemporary literature formulates three major strands derived from political theory: liberalism, communitarianism and republicanism, the latter two being seen as 'challengers' to the dominant liberal paradigm. It is certainly not the case that all political theorists can be slotted neatly into one of these categories, but it is useful to understand the basic distinctions. To this core list we can add cosmopolitan or post-national citizenship, a vision that has become increasingly salient in the wake of globalization. The intention here is not to provide a thorough discussion of these models or their historical evolution, but a few points about them will be highlighted; in particular, tilting towards republicanism in the discussion that follows, since this version of citizenship most obviously asserts the role of active civic engagement. However, not everything in the other two traditions is simply rejected: it is my view that the differences are to some extent ones of emphasis. I share Beiner's (1995) perspective that any contemporary theory of democracy must acknowledge some productive interplay between the three (see also Mason, 2000, who accentuates the common ground between liberals and republicans).

On the one hand, the classic liberal model of democracy and citizenship underscores individual rights.[1] The state's role is seen in minimalist terms: it exists to protect the freedom of citizens, allowing them to pursue their own lives and happiness without causing injury to others. The citizen pursues their interests through making rational choices. With the advent of the neo-liberal hegemony, this interpretation of the state becomes sharpened further: the state can promote individual liberty and happiness not least by reducing obstacles to the dynamics of the market. There is a strange absence of sociological perspective in liberal theories of citizenship. The individual is seen implicitly as emerging as a fully-formed

citizen, devoid of social bonds, out of some sociocultural black box, ready to play his or her role in democracy. Citizenship becomes an activity where 'no experience is necessary'; there is a sense in which the citizen is just 'acting naturally' in pursuing their own interests.

On the other hand, communitarianism can be seen as one sort of response to liberalism's extreme individualism (see for example, Etzioni, 1993; Frankel Paul et al., 1996; Taylor, 1994; Walzer, 1983, 1994). While its origins are anchored deeply in the history of political philosophy, communitarianism has gained momentum since the early 1980s. Its milder versions make the reasonable sociological claim that shared values and cultural cohesion are important for the functioning of political community. Stronger versions argue that a primordial, pre-political community is necessary if democracy is to function properly. Community has been a key theme within sociology since the late 19th century – often because of its perceived absence or weakness. While some sense of community is important for citizenship, communitarianism in its more ambitious modes (for example, Etzioni, 1993), appears to be striving for an implausible breadth and depth; in the late modern world there is something mythic about achieving such stable community among groups where it has not been in existence already for a very long time. And where it has been in existence, there often looms the risk that such communities may become closed enclaves, functioning in a repressive manner, in conflict with the formal rights and liberties of society at large.

Republicanism acknowledges elements from the liberal tradition (such as the emphasis on individual rights) and communitarianism (civic bonds need to be shaped by some sense of community). To emphasize a modern rendering of the concept, some writers speak of civic republicanism; van Gunsteren (1998) prefers the term 'neo-republicanism'. This tradition generally underscores the idea of citizenship as a mode of social agency within the context of pluralistic interests. Writers in the republican tradition insist on the active participation of citizens in democratic self-governance. As de Tocqueville (1969[1835/40]) observed in his study of the United States in the 1830s, involvement in public life is seen not just as a duty, but as something offering its own personal rewards. In participating in democracy, republicanism sees people becoming connected to each other and developing as individuals. Thus republicanism underscores not only the formal, legal dimension, as does liberalism, but also an ethical one. Republicanism asserts that democracy requires civic virtues from its citizens and cultivating these virtues turns citizens into better people by developing abilities that otherwise would remain unfulfilled.

At the outer edges of republicanism we find what is termed 'radical democracy'. Informed by poststructural theory, it combines notions about the contextual nature of identity and subject positions with a view of political struggle as shaped by ever-shifting contingencies. There is no end point for conflict (or for democracy). We–they boundaries are redrawn

continuously as new issues and conflicts arise. It accentuates the centrality of difference and heterogeneity and the importance of progressive groups building alliances. Even one individual can encompass several (even contradictory) political positions at a particular point in time by virtue of multiple group identities or memberships. Thus, radical democracy not only underscores the dimension of difference (it sees this as an inexorable quality of viable modern democracies), but also argues for the importance of political systems that are committed to the formal rules of democracy. The vision of an integrated citizenry needs to be tempered by respect for heterogeneity while at the same time unequivocally defending the principles of equality and justice. Easy? Hardly. Does democracy have any alternative to dealing with such dialectical tensions? Not if it wants to remain true to its ideals. Radical democracy retains a republican quality precisely in its emphasis on agency, its view of the common good and its commitment to democratic values and procedures, while at the same time highlighting the tensions between them.[2] As might be foreseen, it is particularly with the radical democracy version of republicanism that the links to cultural studies become visible.

While republicanism puts the sociological theme of how citizens become engaged on the agenda, the obvious question that arises is to what extent is it sociologically realistic to expect more citizens to participate in public life? The prevailing sociocultural conditions of globalized late modernity would seem to speak against such a vision. In fact, ever since the ideal of the responsible and engaged citizen became entrenched in the early 20th century, its proponents have been shaking their finger at ordinary people for not shouldering their civic obligations sufficiently. Should we merely join in with such complaints, the logical conclusion being that democracy is a great idea, it just needs a different breed of citizen to run it? Or do we suppress this history and opt for an easy but unfounded optimism? Or do we rethink the notion of citizenship itself?

Of course, the answers to such questions must be equivocal: simply jumping on the bandwagon of complaint would be a dead end, and at the same time we would be ill-served by uncritically accepting low levels of engagement. If facile optimism quickly ushers us into irrelevance, to be locked into a bleak view that nothing in this regard can change invites paralysis. Putting our energies into reconsidering the parameters of citizenship – which is precisely what the sprawling field of citizenship studies is doing – at least holds out the possibility of making some relevant conceptual progress.

While nobody anticipates that all citizens will become embodiments of republican virtue, there are no doubt different levels of anticipation as well as different notions as to what portion of the citizenry needs to manifest such virtues in order to constitute a critical mass – in different societies and at various points in history. Certainly, there are also conflicting views as to how to attain such goals. As with the democratic ideal in

general, republicanism can be seen as containing a certain mythic dimension: it provides a normative vision that serves to mobilize and direct concerns for civic renewal. At the same time we should be wary of the pitfall of nostalgia for a past that never was. Certainly one way to proceed – indeed the key trajectory, it could be argued – is to situate citizenship in the context of current discussions which critically probe the very notion of 'the political'. The traditional view, inherited from political theory and science, political communication and the public sphere tradition, is premised on polarities such as rationality/emotion, analysis/experience, knowledge/pleasure and information/entertainment.

This 'either/or' view is being challenged from many corners (see Hall, 2005, for a recent intervention) and rightly so. However, it is now time to begin a reconstruction process whereby these insights are applied systematically to the notion of civic agency, in a manner where critics productively begin to insert concrete cultural parameters into the abstract framework of republican theory.

Becoming citizens: everyday life and civil society

A contemporary starting point for such an endeavour might be via the literature on civil society, where the republican imaginary links up with the notion of citizenship as agency, as achievement, in more sociological terms. Civil society is a notion lodged within several different intellectual traditions whose premises and vocabularies are not always commensurable (we can sidestep most of the issues here as well as the history of the concept). While the concept is, as Edwards (2004: vi) remarks in the preface to his handy overview of the subject, 'notoriously slippery' (for an array of different versions, see Chambers and Kymlicka, 2002), it has been productively joined with republicanism.

We can note that theories of civil society have been very much on the upswing through the 1990s, not only inspired in small part by the political developments of dissent in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, but also encouraged by the growth in activist social movements. The concept figures in both normative political philosophy (e.g., Gellner, 1994; Keane, 1998; Sandel, 1996) and the social science literature (e.g. Janoski, 1998; Putnam, 2000). In some theoretical renderings, it begins to merge with the notion of the public sphere (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Edwards, 2004; Habermas, 1996). However, at the general level, civil society is seen by many writers as the societal terrain between the state and the economy, the realm of free association where citizens can interact to pursue their shared interests, including political ones. Obviously, it is not always easy to classify which of the many forms of collective activity, association or organization in late modern society should be considered part of civil society. For example, it is not clear whether all religious associations qualify, and anti-democratic or racist groups are also an issue in this regard.

Still, there is a dominant trajectory in civil society thinking which again signals a degree of optimism: a healthy democracy needs a robust domain of associational interaction. What becomes interesting from the standpoint of cultural studies is how the argument continues – it is posited that such interaction helps individuals to develop socially, to shape their identities, to foster values suitable for democracy and to learn to deal with conflict in productive ways. In short, a realm of practice, self-creation and meaning-making now opens up. Civil society can serve as a training ground that 'grooms' citizens, preparing them for civic participation and political engagement, even if there still usually remains a gap between, on the one hand, mere membership in associations and, on the other hand, dealing with real political situations and conflicts. Central to the perspectives of cultural studies is the importance of processes whereby humans become social members, creating themselves and their cultural patterns and being shaped by them, particularly with regards to public life.

What the civil society horizon adds to republicanism is a sociocultural view of what is required for a democracy to function and how people might develop their civic roles. Putnam (2000) makes this case forcefully; his 'bowling alone' metaphor captures not least the lack of communicative interaction among citizens in a time when civic involvement is in decline. This results in a reduced 'social capital' among citizens – seen specifically as diminished networks of social contacts – which includes not least a reduction in communicative competencies (for debates around this thesis, see the contributions in Edwards et al., 2001). With increased fragmentation and atomization follows a decline in social trust, which further inhibits participation.

The civil society perspective is, then, another major tradition that underscores (albeit in a multivocal manner) civic agency and the need for specific civic competences and virtues. Further, there is the important constructionist perspective that tries to take into account how people actually become such civic agents: how they self-create themselves into citizens. Even if there are ambiguities here, the civil society perspective affirms the importance of theorizing about what we might call 'suitable acculturation' – a dimension usually absent in the liberal cosmology. At a more ambitious level of abstraction, there is also an understanding that, for democracy to work, we must look beyond its institutionalized structures and dynamics. While these are essential, if they are not filled by real flesh-and-blood people with relevant values, virtues and competencies, democracy will become merely a hollow formalism.

The diagnoses vary as to why civil society is not working as it should. Along with sound reasoning, Putnam's (2000) view includes a somewhat simplistic scapegoating of the way in which our time is monopolized by television culture and its general dumbing-down effects, while from the more nuanced angle of critical theory, Cohen and Arato (1992) and Chambers (2002) anchor their analyses in the complexities of late

capitalism. Sennett's (1977) analysis of the historical decline of publicness in American culture also pursues a range of sociocultural factors.

Building his view on several other authors, Stewart's (2000) perspective on civic agency underscores that such activity is grounded in experience. He posits that genuine democratic participation is something that on occasion 'breaks out' among citizens, something that alters the normal modes of interaction. However, this burst of affective engagement and motivated participation in itself is not sufficient. Echoing republican or civil society notions about virtues and skills, he argues for the necessity of communicative civic competencies that will enable citizens to make use of such bursts of democratic activity and empower them. Stewart writes of the importance of being able to recognize and interpret different kinds of political situations and being able to judge what kinds of action are suitable and necessary. This is a learning process in which one can acquire civic expertise gradually, not least through one's mistakes; competence emerges through trial-and-error practices. Agre (2004) follows a similar line of reasoning, underscoring citizenship's need for social skills that are anchored in everyday life. He points out how a number of ambitious theories that focus on democracy ignore this basic perspective. The theory of social capital, for example (associated with Putnam, 2000 and others), builds on the notions of networks and trust but ignores the more fundamental insight that both of these notions are predicated on concrete competencies of interaction. Agre takes many of the proponents of republicanism to task for largely ignoring the character and substance of the social skills that civic agents must apply. Among other things, these skills have to do with social interaction, rhetoric, the capacity to define issues and lobbying as well as the ability to recognize, define and exploit relevant political situations.

This suggests not only the obvious point that citizenship is, in part, a question of learning by doing, but also that civic competence cannot derive exclusively from political society; it emerges from the overall development of the subject. The position of civil society theorists who claim that non-political contexts of civil society can have a bearing on how people engage and manage in political contexts opens the gate for crossing the boundary between politics and non-politics. These thoughts on civic agency will be carried forward in the next section, which addresses the classic notion of the public sphere. This concept can be challenged to offer new angles on the theme of civic agency, especially when pressed against (often implicit) notions of the private sphere.

Public spheres as interactional practices

By now, the early Habermasian (1989) floor plan of the public sphere hardly needs much reiteration. That the political public sphere in this tradition is seen normatively as being comprised of institutional

communicative spaces, universally accessible, which facilitate the formation of public opinion and political will-formation via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas, is quite familiar. Also familiar is the critical understanding of the many mechanisms which inhibit the full realization of these ideals, not least in regard to the media. Habermas points to the class biases of the bourgeois public sphere and feminist critics (e.g. Fraser, 1992; Meehan, 1995) have reminded him of the exclusionary mechanisms based on gender. We have come to see also that the public sphere is far from unitary; empirically, it consists of vast numbers of communicative spaces, sprawling social fields of almost immense variety. At the same time, these multiple spheres are by no means equal in terms of access or political impact. Some are socially and politically more 'mainstream' and situated closer to the powers of decision-making. Others are geared more towards the interests and needs of specific groups, emphasizing, for example, either the need for collective group identity-formation or the ambition to offer alternative political orientations, that is, subaltern, counterpublic spheres (Asen and Brouwer, 2001; Fenton and Downing, 2003; Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002).

We should keep in mind that most public spheres do not have decision-making powers. Following Fraser's (1992) critique of his scheme, Habermas (1996) develops an elaboration: the two-track conception of democratic deliberation. On the one hand, there are 'strong' public spheres that are linked to formal decision-making – legislative and judicial assemblies. On the other, there are all those innumerable 'weak' informal settings which allow not only for the circulation of ideas and the development of political will and public opinion, but also for the important development and emergence of collective identities. These have no formalized, institutionalized coupling to decision-making, but of course the health of democracy rests on the successful mediation between the formal and the informal tracks – that decision-making bodies always can (and will) take into serious account, but not necessarily slavishly follow, the views manifested in public opinion.

'Publics' should be conceptualized as something other than merely media audiences (for a recent engaging discussion on this theme, see Livingstone, 2005a). Ultimately, democracy resides with citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various kinds. Further, interaction is activity and it has its sites and spaces, discursive practices, contextual aspects. These can be explored empirically. The public sphere does not begin and end when media content reaches an audience; this is but one step in larger communication and cultural chains that include how the media output is received, made sense of and utilized by citizens. While it can be useful to think in terms of a 'standing' or always potentially ready general public, a more dynamic understanding emerges by conceptualizing complementary specific issue-publics that emerge, exist for varying durations and then eventually dissolve.

Thus the public sphere can be seen as being comprised of a multiplicity of dynamic, interactional constellations, some relatively more permanent, others more fleeting. While the mass media catalyse the formation of audiences, these audiences coalesce into publics through the processes of engagement with issues and discursive interaction among themselves, either via face-to-face settings of various kinds or mediated ones, including not just the internet but all kinds of horizontal 'mini' media such as organizational newsletters, neighbourhood bulletins, union newspapers and activist pamphlets. In an illuminating essay on these themes, Dayan (2005) argues that publics not only manifest a performative dimension in some way – by doing communicative practices – but also that they constitute themselves as 'imagined communities'. That is, they take form by defining themselves in terms of a collective 'we'. Audiences that coalesce into publics who talk about political issues – and begin to enact their civic identities and make use of their civic competencies – move from the private realm into the public one, making use of and further developing their cultures of citizenship.

The traditional concepts of the public sphere do not help us to understand how publics 'come alive', what their sociocultural preconditions look like.[3] One of the theoretical quandaries of public sphere theory has been precisely that social and cultural evolution increasingly continues to scramble, blur and reconfigure the distinctions between public and private. This quandary hinders our understanding of the public sphere in more concrete, empirical and even ethnographic terms. While it is important to make distinctions, boundaries need to be rethought if we are not to be misled. As has been pointed out often, the idea of 'public' is associated implacably with reason, rationality, objectivity, argument, work, text, information and knowledge (and, de facto, one might add, discursively dominant, masculine and Caucasian). 'Private' resonates with the personal, emotion, intimacy, subjectivity, identity, consumption, aesthetics, style, entertainment, popular culture and pleasure. If this whole side is walled off analytically from our understanding of politics, then we will never be able to understand, for example, the motivations, identities and passions that can launch people into the public sphere.

There are basically two aspects at work here. On the one hand, we have the interactional social sites and settings of what is seen traditionally as the private sphere, where most media reception still takes place and where we can point readily to sociocultural connections between the public and private. As Livingstone (2005a) puts it in a discussion on audiences and citizens, we need to see how private activities, framed by cultural practice, indeed can have consequences for how the public sphere functions. The public spaces of politics are intertwined with the private spaces of the home and personal relationships. Moreover, the development of the civic competencies brought to bear in the public sphere have many origins in the private sphere and prevalent modes of thought. In our everyday lives we make

sense of our experiences, ourselves and the world around us largely through an 'arational' mode, a combination of using our head and heart. There is no reason why the public sphere should – or even could – be any different. We should recall that, in the context of the debates at the time in Germany around Habermas' theses, Negt and Kluge (1993[1973]) argued for the importance of reflections on lived, personal circumstances and occurrences.

On the other hand, we have the empirical permeability between public and private that is abundantly visible in the late modern media milieu (see the analyses by Livingstone, 2005b; Scheller and Urry, 2003), not least in the blending of politics and entertainment and other forms of popular culture. There is a growing literature on this theme which not only dissects analytically the unproductive polarization, but also demonstrates how various forms of popular culture play important political roles for democracy; also how indeed 'infotainment' – a blurring of traditional genre categories – helps people to connect the private and public, the personal and political (see for example, Corner and Pels, 2003; Hermes, 2005; Jones, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005).

In short, to understand the origins of civic competence, we need to look beyond the public sphere itself into the terrain of the private – or, expressed alternatively, into the experiential domain of everyday life or civil society. It is not a question of collapsing the public into the private (or vice versa), but rather of elucidating the dynamics between them, understanding the experiences that people derive in this interplay and their relevance for civic agency. To use a phrase that John Ellis (2000) employs in regard to television but which can be extended to mediated popular culture more generally, such media output often plays a role of helping us 'work through' much of what we see and experience in society. At times it may be largely non-political, other times more proto-political, while in certain cases it may take on explicit political relevance for some of its audiences.

Identities as citizens are entwined with other identities that we mobilize in other contexts; the boundaries between them are fluid. For example, even our identities in the intimate domain – family life, gender, choices about sexual preferences, birthing, abortion and medical technologies having to do with the body – can take on political relevance quickly and set civic engagement in motion.[4] In fact, viable public spheres are a kind of democratic accomplishment of civic agency, a manifestation of a robust republicanism and a healthy civil society; yet such accomplishments have cultural origins that could be probed and analysed.

Deliberative democracy and its limits

We can say that the interactional public sphere emerges as a sector of civil society where and when political issues have become actualized via talk or other forms of action by citizens. Interactional public spheres are mainly

about discussion, yet how are we to understand such civic communication? What does it look (or sound) like and what should it look or sound like? How can we best envision the interactivity of citizens? A certain idealized view of citizen interaction has come into prominence during the past two decades, galvanizing much of the reflection on democracy and discussion. Habermas' notions about communicative rationality are among the foundations, but there have been contributions and developments from others as well. It goes under the label of deliberative democracy, which melds elements of political theory with perspectives on communication. While it has much to recommend it, there is also a risk that this prevailing view of civic interaction delimits our understanding of the kinds of cultural practices that should characterize civic agency in the public sphere, pushing to the margins certain kinds of communicative competencies and practices that are important for a robust democracy.

Talk is seen as constitutive of publics and is thus both morally and functionally vital for democracy. In that sense, the basic idea of deliberative democracy is as old as democracy itself. However, it has gone through a revival of sorts over the past two decades and been given a major theoretical facelift. Deliberative democracy has become a buzzword with high valence within democratic theorizing, and rightly so. Yet, seen from the standpoint of the practical participation of citizens, this theoretical orientation also has some pitfalls to which we should be alert. The model of deliberative democracy follows the traditional notions of the public sphere and becomes extended via Habermas' (1987[1984]) investigations into communicative rationality. Many have developed further as well as criticized these ideas (see for example, Benhabib, 1996; Bohman, 1996; Bohman and Regh, 1997; Dryzek, 2000; Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991; Guttman and Thompson, 2004; Passerin d'Entrèves, 2002. Among the stronger critics are Gardiner, 2004; Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 2000; Sanders, 1997).

As its point of departure, deliberative democracy underscores the importance of providing reasons for decisions taken (here I build on Guttman and Thompson's 2004 lucid overview). This is a moral principle common to most theoretical versions of democracy, since it lays the foundation for reciprocity. Reciprocity means that decision-makers owe it to those who must live under their decisions, policies or the institutions that they enact to provide their constituents with the justifications for their decisions. The dynamics of deliberative democracy are characterized by the norms of equality and symmetry; everyone is to have an equal chance of participation. Also, both the rules of discussion and topics to be discussed can be challenged in principle and the agenda itself is to be agreed upon mutually. Another important principle is that the reasons should be made accessible to all concerned; this means not only that they should be made public in some manner, but also be comprehensible. Further, deliberative democracy aims to result in decisions that are

binding, at least for some period of time; they are geared to take effect, to have consequences. Yet, decisions are reversible in principle, circumstances permitting; dialogue is never ultimately closed off.

Deliberative democracy serves to support the legitimacy of decisions that are taken, thereby enhancing the vitality of democratic institutions. Also, it seeks to foster public-spirited perspectives in politics by encouraging the development of clear justifications for one's choices and decisions, as well as a more generalized sense of the collective good. In the process, it further develops civic skills. Deliberative democracy strives for mutual respect: in the give and take of argumentation, it is assumed that opponents will learn from each other and expand each others' horizons. Such civic interaction is seen to be especially significant in situations where difference exists, where consensus is not likely and compromise is the best that one can hope for – where partners can arrive at acceptable solutions via dialogue without having to give up on core moral values.

At first glance, this appears to be a rather attractive vision, one that is in harmony with a vigorous republican/civil society standpoint. It should be underscored that the interrogation of it here does not aim to be dismissive. Rather, it highlights some of the issues that this view of civic interaction raises, encouraging us to see its limits and not overload the role that we expect it to play in the public sphere. The discussion here will centre around three themes: the issue of defining what kinds of talk should count as deliberation, the issue of excessive rationality as an ideal and the problem of discursive power.

What kind of talk?

Contemporary views about citizen talk tends to make a basic distinction between genuine deliberation – that which takes place in political contexts – and other talk, which of course can vary immensely. However, clinging too rigidly to formal deliberation risks losing sight of everyday talk and its potential relevance for democracy. There remains an awful lot of discussion which can have political relevance but which has no status in a strict deliberative perspective. This becomes apparent if we look at a different point of departure in regard to civic talk, as found in Barber (1984, 1999), Walzer (1992) and other 'republicans' who attribute potential political relevance to other, informal kinds of talk. In their perspective, while no doubt they would acknowledge the importance of formal deliberation and its settings, they look beyond them to understand better the processes by which the political emerges in and through talk, not least via the stimulation of interaction with the media. They emphasize instead the permeability of contexts, the messiness and unpredictability of everyday talk, in order to put forth the view that politics – and thus the individual's identities as citizen – is never an *a priori* given, but can emerge in various ways within informal everyday speech.

It is via meandering and unpredictable talk that the political can be generated, that the links between the personal and the political can be established. The looseness, open-endedness of everyday talk, its creativity, potential for empathy and affective elements are indispensable for the vitality of democratic politics. Barber (1984) asserts that even if citizens' interaction may be wanting in terms of deep knowledge and well thought out opinions, it is crucial for maintaining a sense of collective civic identity and generating a collective will. Similarly, Bohman sees citizen talk as important for maintaining 'a constant and vibrant interaction among cultures and sub-politics in a larger sphere of common citizenship' (1996: 145). In his view, the character of civic talk is dynamic, open-ended and reflexive: self-creation takes place in part via civic participation. If we wish to be conceptually precise, we could say that 'messy conversation' is part of the larger terrain of civil society, but as it begins to take on political connotations, as it becomes in some sense civic, it activates the public sphere (the weak, non-decision-making one).

If we accept that all forms of talk are of potential relevance for civic discussion, that politics can materialize even in unexpected contexts of daily conversation, this does not mean we would want to study any and all contexts of verbal interaction. Obviously, we would have to be selective about where we aim our analytic searchlights, trying to glean that which is beginning to percolate politically. Formal deliberative democracy is too restrictive as an ideal; it banishes by definition that speech which may be on its way towards politics, speech which originates in the disjointed settings of everyday life and yet manages to join together experience and information, wisdom and reflection in ways that may lead to question, contestation, political conflict.

Excessive rationality

However, even if we agree that the genre of formal deliberative democracy can play an important role in certain settings, the question remains: what should such deliberation look like? How should we envision full-blown political discussion? Habermasian versions are adamant that fully rational deliberation follows a strict adherence to the literal and transparent dimension of discourse. Indeed, a common complaint has focused on what is seen to be the excessively rational character of such speech. The formal–rational view of speech that Habermas and other proponents use stands in contrast to other, more multidimensional views of deliberation.

Citing Bohman (1996), Kohn suggests that political innovation requires the formation of new publics, indeed, new ways of framing social reality that foster the formulation of new issues and strategies, that problematize or 'denaturalize' conventional perceptions and entrenched ideological positions. This involves the use of such communicative strategies as 'irony, personal narrative, aesthetic interventions, theatricality and visibility'

(Kohn, 2000: 425), which of course, in its emphasis on performance, marks a profound departure from Habermas' ideal. Further, Mayhew (1997) takes Habermas to task for positioning himself against the use of rhetoric, the eloquent appeals and persuasion based on group trust rather than on universalist discursive criteria.[5] Mayhew (1997) claims that this is not only unrealistic but undesirable, since it undermines the potential richness and vibrancy of political discussion for an illusory ideal.

In a similar vein, Gardiner (2004) contrasts Habermas with Bakhtin. If Habermas holds to the idea of clear, intersubjective understanding of our own or others intentions via speech, Bakhtin asserts that 'living discourse . . . is necessarily charged with polemical qualities, myriad evaluative and stylistic markers and populated by diverse intentions. To participate in dialogue is to immerse ourselves in a plethora of alien words and discourses' (cited in Gardiner, 2004: 36). Citing Bakhtin, Gardiner discusses how dialogue is shaped by polyphonic voices and meaning is always multiple to some degree, avoiding final closure. Similar themes can be found in a range of other intellectual traditions, including semiotics and deconstruction. Especially in the context of politically subordinate and/or culturally diverse groups, the imposition of an abstract, universalist ideal of deliberation can be a very power-laden move. For cultural studies, the field of civic talk, its sites and contexts and how it mobilizes identities and links up with political issues would be a fertile one as well as a constructive antidote to the formalistic version of deliberative democracy.

Discursive power

Another basic issue with deliberative democracy has to do with power, both discursive and social (they are usually intertwined). Deliberative democracy asserts that meaningful political discussion can take place only if all the participants are on an equal footing – that is, if respect, a pluralist outlook and reciprocity prevail. Here is the rub: it is hard to see how this prerequisite, the levelled ground of the discussion, can be achieved fully by discussion itself. As Kohn puts it: 'Reciprocity and equality . . . must be fought for rather than assumed. The dialogue itself cannot achieve its own preconditions' (2000: 417). This undermines the universalist dimension, i.e. that deliberative democracy rests on a foundation that is, by definition, available to all. This does not mean that we should dismiss normative concepts such as equality, citizenship or liberty as illusions, but rather understand that in the real world they are contingent and provisional; they must be interrogated to learn how they function in specific circumstances. In fact, one could ask: given that the distribution of communicative skills tends to follow general social hierarchies and thereby may serve to reinforce such hierarchies, why should we expect citizens with lower communicative skills to participate? Also, why should we anticipate that

deliberative democracy is a good way for citizens to have an impact on the decisions that affect them? Public speaking often correlates with power and cultural capital, and the fact that many people are afraid to speak on controversial matters in public undercuts the universalist ideal.

Agre (2004) posits that, actually, in most political discussions people are not even deliberating. He suggests that in the media age, if one listens to the arguments that people bring to bear on political matters, often they are merely repeating what they have derived from professional opinion-makers such as politicians, columnists, scholars, pundits or even opinion leaders that they may have encountered face-to-face. Most people do not have the time, energy or knowledge to develop their own original arguments on most issues. Agre suggests that, for the most part, even the professional opinion-makers are merely repackaging standard arguments that are already in circulation and applying them to specific situations. He does not denigrate the idea of civic discussion, he just wants to bring it down to earth. He suggests that what citizens largely do is to pick and choose from an available marketplace of prefabricated ideas, and that fundamentally, this is not so bad. Just how this is done could become an important research question about cultural practices.

Moreover, if the deliberation itself appears to take place in a discursive mode that appears universal, neutral and egalitarian, yet is in fact the prerogative of privileged social strata, then this mode can serve to conceal and legitimate its own function as symbolic power. Further, it has been shown many times that groups and movements, particularly if they start with little power, will effect democratic change – have more impact on the power-holders who make decisions – via mobilization and collective action rather than through discussion. The emphasis on reaching consensus through dialogue suggests that floating beneath the surface of the model is an assumption that conflict basically derives from inadequate communication. Better communication is always desirable, but to suppress or deny the fact that conflicts indeed may have the character of real antagonisms, where shared values are insufficient to generate a common understanding of what is 'reasonable', ultimately will not yield better communication. Thus, what this suggests is that civic agency must engage in a variety of practices beyond strict deliberation in order to come to terms with the often-prevailing imbalances of discursive and social power such as lobbying, mobilizing, bargaining, disruption and even civil disobedience.

Citizenship as a terrain for cultural studies

The notion of civic agency is given theoretical boosts by both the republican tradition within political theory and the perspectives on civil society from political sociology. When we turn our attention to the public sphere, the traditional blinders about private domains – in which people's experiences and various cultural practices can have relevance for their civic

competence – hamper our understanding. Moreover, the at-times restrictive view of what ideally should take place in the public sphere, namely deliberative democracy, further narrows our field of vision in regard to civic agency and interaction. In this chain of conceptualization, it is clear that at each point, issues of agency, practice, meaning and identity can be thematized. Citizenship studies are now in a growth period (e.g. Isin and Turner, 2002; see also the other articles in this issue) and a major 'cultural turn' here would be beneficial. Cultural studies has established its expertise in analysing popular culture, studying the practices of particular groups and elucidating the processes of meaning-making in specific settings. Furthermore, it has been critical about power relations and vocal in support of democracy. This field could make outstanding contributions by applying such analytic perspectives to our understanding of citizenship and civic agency. Robust initiatives, unafraid of grappling with the concrete conceptual issues and empirical landscape of citizenship, could help to move citizenship studies beyond its at-times traditional frameworks and shed new light on the microdynamics of democracy.

This involves entering into critical dialogue with intellectual and research traditions towards which cultural studies has stood a bit aloof to various degrees thus far, especially regarding theories about the public sphere, deliberative democracy and political communication. These traditions all have something to offer in regard to understanding civic agency and competence and all have their limitations. All have their differences that must be respected. Yet a synergic interplay between them and cultural studies would both deepen our understanding of citizenship as well as adding to the analytic capacity of cultural studies.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to the Learn IT Research School in Sweden for a grant that facilitated work on this text. Also, may thanks to journal editors Joke Hermes, Pekka Rantenan and Pertti Alasuutari for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

Notes

1. The literature is, of course, vast. For the classic 19th-century statement, see Mill (1998[1861]), even if his focus is on justice; Rawls (1972) is cited often as a major contemporary milestone.
2. Key texts here are Laclau (1993), Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Mouffe (1992, 1993, 2000, 2005). For a short overview, see Rasmussen and Brown (2002).
3. This theme has been handled better in the literature on civil society. See also my discussion on civic culture (Dahlgren, 2003).
4. Plummer (2003) has highlighted nicely this realm of 'intimate citizenship'.
5. Garnham (2000) chapter 8 elaborates on this point.

References

Agre, Philip E. (2004) 'The Practical Republic: Social Skills and the Progress of Citizenship', in A. Feenberg and D. Barney (eds) *Community in the Digital Age*, pp. 201–23. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Asen, Robert and Daniel C. Brouwer (eds) (2001) *Counterpublics and the State*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Barber, Benjamin (1984) *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barber, Benjamin (1999) *A Place for Us*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Beiner, Ronald (ed.) (1995) *Theorizing Citizenship*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Benhabib, Seyla (ed.) (1996) *Democracy and Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bohman, James (1996) *Public Deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bohman, James and William Regh (eds) (1997) *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chambers, Simone (2002) 'A Critical Theory of Civil Society', in Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds) *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*, pp. 90–110. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chambers, Simone and Will Kymlicka (eds) (2002) *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cohen, Jean and Andrew Arato (1992) *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Corner, John and Dick Pels (eds) (2003) *Media and Political Style: Essays on Representation and Civic Culture*. London: Sage.

Dahlgren, Peter (2003) 'Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu', in John Corner and Dick Pels (eds) *Media and Political Style: Essays on Representation and Civic Culture*, pp. 151–70. London: Sage.

Dayan, Daniel (2005) 'Mothers, Midwives and Abortionists: Geneology, Obstetrics, Audiences and Publics', in Sonia Livingstone (ed.) *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*, pp. 43–76. Bristol: Intellect.

de Tocqueville, Alexis (1969[1835/40]) *Democracy in America* (2 vols, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. G. Lawrence). Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Dryzek, John S. (2000) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Edwards, Bob, Michael W. Foley and Mario Diani (eds) (2001) *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Edwards, Michael (2004) *Civil Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ellis, John (2000) *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Elster, Jon (ed.) (1998) *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Etzioni, Amitai (1993) *The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Fenton, Nancy and John Downing (2003) 'Counter Public Spheres and Global Modernity', *Javnost/The Public* 10(1): 15–32.
Fishkin, J. (1991) *Democracy and Deliberation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Frankel Paul, Ellen, Fred D. Miller and Jeffrey Paul (eds) (1996) *The Communitarian Challenge to Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Fraser, Nancy (1992) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 109–42. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
Gardiner, Michael E. (2004) 'Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on Dialogue, Everyday Life and the Public Sphere', in Nick Crossly and John M. Roberts (eds) *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, pp. 28–48. Oxford: Blackwell.
Garnham, Nicholas (2000) *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity: Arguments About the Media and Social Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gellner, Ernest (1994) *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*. London: Allan Lane/Penguin.
Guttman, Amy and Dennis Thompson (2004) *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (1987[1984]) *The Theory of Communicative Action* (2 vols). Cambridge: Polity Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Habermas, Jürgen (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Hall, Cheryl (2005) *The Trouble with Passion: Political Theory Beyond the Reign of Reason*. London: Routledge.
Hermes, Joke (2005) *Rereading Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Isin, Engin F. and Bryan S. Turner (eds) (2002) *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*. London: Sage.
Janoski, Thomas (1998) *Citizenship and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Jones, Jeffrey P. (2005) *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
Keane, John (1998) *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Kohn, Margaret (2000) 'Language, Power, Persuasion: Toward a Critique of Deliberative Democracy', *Constellations* 7(3): 408–29.
Laclau, Ernesto (1993) *Emancipations*. London: Verso.
Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
Livingstone, Sonia (2005a) 'On the Relation Between Audiences and Publics', in

Sonia Livingstone (ed.) *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*, pp. 17–41. Bristol: Intellect.
Livingstone, Sonia (2005b) 'In Defence of Privacy: Mediating the Public/Private Boundary at Home', in Sonia Livingstone (ed.) *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*, pp. 163–85. Bristol: Intellect.
Mason, Andrew (2000) *Community, Solidarity and Belonging: Levels of Community and their Normative Significance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Mayhew, Leon H. (1997) *The New Public*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Meehan, Johanna (ed.) (1995) *Feminists Read Habermas*. London: Routledge.
Mill, John Stuart (1998[1861]) *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mouffe, Chantal (ed.) (1992) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. London: Verso.
Mouffe, Chantal (1993) *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso.
Mouffe, Chantal (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
Mouffe, Chantal (2005) *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
Negt, Oskar and Alexander Kluge (1993[1973]) *The Public Sphere and Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Passerin d'Entrèves, Maurizio (ed.) (2002) *Democracy as Public Deliberation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Plummer, Ken (2003) *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Rasmussen, Claire and Michael Brown (2002) 'Radical Democratic Citizenship: Amidst Political Theory and Geography', in Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner (eds) *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, pp. 175–88. London: Sage.
Rawls, John (1972) *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Sandel, Michael J. (1996) *Democracy's Discontent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Sanders, Lynn (1997) 'Against Deliberation', *Political Theory* 25(3): 347–76.
Scheller, Maria and John Urry (2003) 'Mobile Transformations: "Public" and "Private" Life', *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(3): 107–25.
Sennett, Richard (1977) *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopf.
Stewart, Angus (2000) *Theories of Power and Domination*. London: Sage.
Taylor, Charles (1994) *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
van Gunsteren, Herman R. (1998) *A Theory of Citizenship*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
van Zoonen, Liesbet (2005) *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
Walzer, Michael (1983) *Spheres of Justice*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Walzer, Michael (1992) 'The Civil Society Argument', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, pp. 89–107. London: Verso.
Walzer, Michael (1994) *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press.
Warner, Michael (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.

Biographical note

Peter Dahlgren is Professor of Media and Communication at Lund University, Sweden. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Paris II, Rhodes University in South Africa, the University of Stirling and the University of Québec in Montreal. His research focuses on democracy, the evolution of the media and contemporary sociocultural processes. Most recently he has been looking at how young citizens make use of new communication technologies for democratic engagement and identity work. His book, *Media and Civic Engagement*, is forthcoming (Cambridge University Press). ADDRESS: MKV, Lund University, Box 114, 21100 Lund, Sweden. [email: Peter.Dahlgren@mkv.lu.se]